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ABSTRACT

Although basic skills and English language instruction are often viewed as real needs at the workplace, few companies provide this for their workers. Those that do are motivated by one or more of these factors: product quality improvement, commitment of top management to training and education, or the sales effort of an educational provider. Those that do not provide such instruction give these reasons: cost of instruction; reluctance of upper management to initiate training; and finding alternative ways of dealing with workers' educational deficiencies. Developers of instructional programs in English as a second language (ESL) have found that preparation in a number of areas and product characteristics can enhance the success of their marketing efforts. These include: beginning with companies with a history of offering employee training at all levels; offering realistic assessments of time and resources needed to accomplish training; offering short courses with specific, attainable goals; offering cross-cultural courses to both native and non-native English-speakers at the workplace; developing realistic ways of documenting how instruction has improved workplace performance; engaging managers' active support; and providing skills that transfer to areas of life outside the workplace. Contains 10 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Project in Adult Immigrant Education

National Clearinghouse for ESL
Literacy Education

# Selling Workplace ESL Instructional Programs

By Miriam Burt

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# Selling Workplace ESL Instructional Programs

by Miriam Burt
Center for Applied Linguistics

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a rise in visibility for workplace instructional programs to improve workers' basic skills and English language proficiency. From 1988 through 1994, the U.S. Department of Education's National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP) funded more than 300 basic skills programs, 49% of which offered some English as a second language (ESL) instruction (Burt & Saccomano, 1995). However, independent of (uncertain) federal and other public funding, few companies actually provide instruction in basic skills and ESL to their workers. In fact, a survey done by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994) revealed that of the 12,000 businesses surveyed, only 3% offered training in basic skills or in ESL.

This digest explores the issue of why companies do and do not provide workplace basic skills and ESL instruction. It reports on data from a survey of businesses in Illinois (Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center, 1993) and from interviews with 18 workplace ESL program directors, teacher trainers, curriculum writers, and instructors (Burt, in press); and it offers suggestions to educational providers and independent consultants on how to *sell* or market workplace ESL programs to employers.

## Why Some Businesses Provide Instruction

Managers, education providers, employees, and supervisors from twenty-one businesses in Illinois were interviewed in a study of why businesses do or do not provide basic skills and ESL instruction (Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center, 1993). Fourteen businesses provided this instruction, seven did not. The following were the reasons given for initiating workplace programs:

*Quality improvement*

In manufacturing companies there has been a recent emphasis on quality, which has necessitated a change in the manufacturing process. When companies provided quality improvement trainings, they were not successful. Managers realized that before these could be implemented, basic skills needed to be raised.

*Commitment of top management to training and education*

In some companies, training and education are part of management philosophy. The classes offered in these companies often cover general knowledge and skills. The goal is not necessarily to prepare workers to succeed in other company training, but rather to allow them to pursue their own goals.

*Sales effort of an educational provider*

Educational providers who were knowledgeable and willing to prepare and design basic skills programs at a low cost have sold such programs to managers who are aware of basic skills problems within the workplace. If the employers and the educational provider have a "previously established relationship" (Illinois Literacy Resource Development Center, 1993, p.3), there is a greater chance the employers will buy the educator's services.

The businesses' preferred instruction providers were public schools, community colleges, and universities. In fact, these were preferred over in-house providers and commercial job-training providers. Their third, fourth, and final choices were community-based organizations, private consultants, and union consortia.

## Why Other Businesses Do Not Provide Instruction

Although some of the Illinois business representatives interviewed indicated that they were aware of employee deficits in basic skills and language proficiency, they had not initiated workplace programs. The reasons given were:

*Cost of Instruction*

Some companies did not offer training of any kind to any of their employees—whether as perks for executives, technological training for middle management, or basic skills instruction for entry level workers. Training of any kind was seen as too expensive.

*Reluctance of upper management*

Upper management was at times reluctant to initiate training. This was due, in part, to lack of information about the need for programs, the kinds of programs available, and the cost involved. A 1990 evaluation of state-financed workplace-based retraining programs supports this finding (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1990). This study attributed managers' failure to provide instruction to a lack of information about the best approach to use, uncertainty about how to fit the training into new technology and work processes, and reluctance to disrupt work schedules for an "elusive future benefit" (p.131).

*The not-bad-enough syndrome*

Some companies find other ways of dealing with basic skills deficits rather than providing instructional intervention. For example, some businesses screen prospective employees through a basic skills test. In a 1989 survey by the American Management Association, 90% of the responding companies said they would not hire workers who fail such a test (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1990). Some companies organize the workplace so that the language and literacy deficiencies of already hired workers do not hinder production. These workers may be given the so-called back-of-the-house jobs such as dishwashers or salad preparers, where they have no contact with the public, and minimal, if any, contact with English-speaking coworkers and supervisors. In many companies where most of the workers speak a common native language (often Spanish), frontline managers speak the native language of the workers and the lack of English skills becomes almost irrelevant to the work flow (Burt, in press). However, although the native language may be used almost exclusively in some entry-level positions, in order for workers to be promoted, good English skills are still obligatory (McGroarty, 1990).



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## How Educational Providers Can Sell their Product

Workplace ESL educators from Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Maryland, New York, Texas, and Virginia were asked how programs can best sell their services to businesses (Burt, in press). These practitioners were from educational institutions, community-based organizations, volunteer organizations, union consortia, or from within the business itself. Three were independent consultants who had started their own companies to provide workplace ESL instruction.

The following themes surfaced, many of which echo the conclusions drawn from the survey data listed above.

1. Start out with a better chance of success by contacting companies with a history of offering training for employees at all levels, not just as perks for executives.
2. Don't promise what cannot be delivered. It is not likely that a workplace ESL class of 40-60 hours will turn participants with low-level language skills into fluent speakers of English. Educate all the stakeholders—the general managers, the frontline managers, the human resources department, and the prospective learners themselves—about the length of time needed to achieve proficiency in a second language.
3. Offer short courses, or "learning opportunities" (Jurmo, 1995, p. 12) with a few specific, attainable goals. Discrete, highly targeted courses such as accent reduction, teamwork skills, and pre- total quality management (TQM) are saleable and give learners skills to use in any job or workplace.
4. Seek ways to maximize resources and personnel already at the workplace. Programs can schedule a one-hour class/one-hour study time match at work sites where there are learning centers for individual, computer-assisted instruction. Instructors can team with job skills trainers to offer vocational English as a second language (VESL). The program can require home study to match workplace course hours. This is especially important when offering instruction to learners with low-level English skills who may not yet have the language proficiency necessary to access the more specialized courses listed above.
5. In addition to providing instruction on American workplace practices and values to ESL learners, offer cross-cultural courses to both native and nonnative English speakers at the workplace. This may help dissipate feelings that the language minority workers are getting special treatment and can directly address the need for better communication at the workplace.
6. Develop realistic ways of documenting how instruction has improved performance at the workplace. Promotions due to improved skills are very impressive; however, in many companies, downsizing is occurring, and no one, native or nonnative speaker, is being promoted. Instead, educators can cite other indicators of improvement, such as increased number of written and oral suggestions made by learners at meetings or other appropriate times; increased number of learners expressing the desire to be promoted; and increased number of learners asking to be cross-trained. (See Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1994; and Mrowicki & Conrath, 1994, for discussions of measuring and documenting improvements at the workplace.)
7. Make certain that general managers actively support the program. They authorize the classes and their authority is necessary to ensure that their frontline managers (the participants' direct supervisors) strongly support the classes. The supervisors will arrange schedules so that workers can attend classes, provide opportunities on the job for them to use what they are learning, and encourage them to attend classes regularly. (See Kirby, 1989, for a discussion of the role of frontline managers in ESL instructional programs.)
8. Don't insist on teaching language for the workplace only. Although the workplace is the core of and the backdrop for instruction, workplace instruction does not need to be connected exclusively to workplace skills. Educators know that learning means transfer of skills to other life situations and learners have always sought this link. Many educators interviewed said that company management asked them to teach life skills and general communication skills as well as workplace skills, especially to learners with minimal English.

## Conclusion

Although basic skills and English language instruction are often viewed as real needs at the workplace, few companies provide this for their workers. With the decrease in federal and state funds available for instruction at the workplace, it is not enough for educational providers to design, implement, and evaluate workplace instructional programs. They must also be able to *sell* their programs to the businesses they are asking to sponsor the instruction.

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